

2007 Virginia Deer Season Forecast

2006 Season Review

During the 2006 deer season, 223,198 deer were reported killed by hunters in Virginia. This total included 106,595 antlered bucks, 19,652 button bucks, and 96,951 does (43.4%). This represented a 4% increase from the 215,082 deer reported killed in 2005. It is also 7% higher than the last 10-year average of 208,300.

Across the state, deer kill levels were stable in the Northern Mountains, down 5% in the Northern Piedmont, up 6% in the Southern Mountains, up 11% in the Southern Piedmont, and up 6% in Tidewater.

Archers, not including crossbow hunters, killed 17,100 deer. The bow kill was down about 2% from last year. The bow kill comprised 8% of the total deer kill.

Crossbows, which were legal for all deer hunters for the first time in fall 2005, resulted in a deer kill of 7,051 deer, or 3% of the total deer kill. The crossbow kill was up 28% from last year.

Muzzleloader hunters killed 52,216 deer. The muzzleloader kill was up 6% from the 49,445 deer taken by muzzleloader hunters last year. Muzzleloading comprised 23% of the total deer kill.

Nearly 124,000 deer (~56%) were checked using the Department's telephone checking system. This was up from 44% in 2004, and 51% in 2005.

What's New for Fall 2007

There are two changes for the 2007 season that will affect deer hunters. First, in 2007, the General Assembly passed legislation that added the crossbow license to the youth resident and nonresident com-



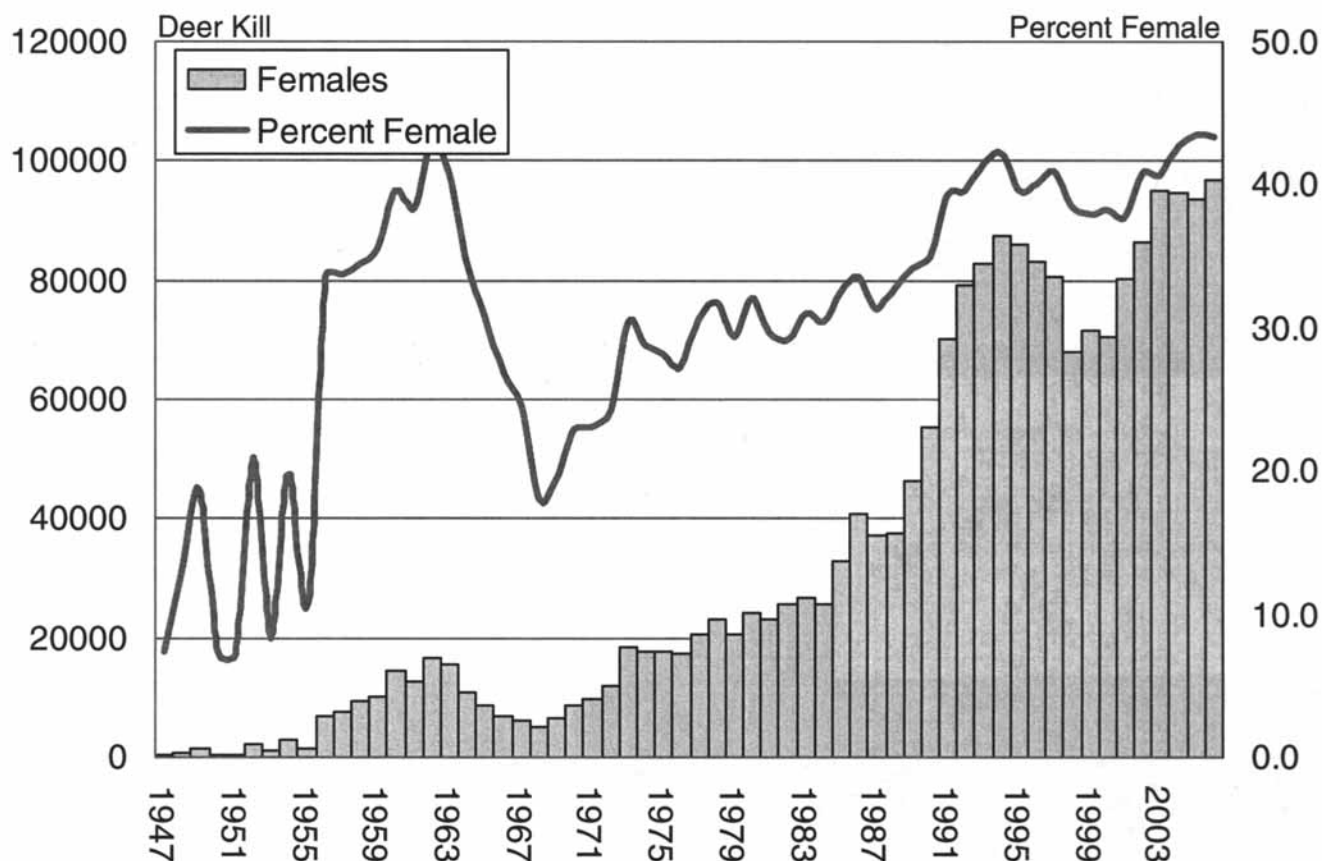
bination licenses at no cost and to the adult resident hunting and fishing license, increasing the fee for this license to \$119. Second, effective fall 2007, deer hunters will be able to check in their deer on the Department's website at www.dgif.virginia.gov. This means that hunters now have three options for checking a deer: The internet, a check station, or the telephone at 1866GOTGAME (1-866-468-4263). Please note that during the fall, only deer may be checked over the internet or phone. Fall turkeys, elk, and bear must be taken to a check station.

Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD)

As most Virginia deer hunters probably know, CWD was found in Hampshire County, West Virginia, in September 2005 approximately 10 miles west of Frederick County, Virginia. The good news is that CWD has still not been detected in Virginia. Since 2003, a total of nearly 3,000 CWD samples have been collected from deer in every county in the Commonwealth.

Due to the discovery of CWD in West Virginia, CWD surveillance was increased in Virginia in 2005 and 2006. A special 1,100 square mile surveillance area was created to include western Shenandoah, western and northern Frederick, northern Clarke, and northern Loudoun counties. CWD has not been detected in this special surveillance area where nearly 1,300 deer heads from road kills and hunters were collected and tested over the past two falls.

For 2007, the Department will conduct statewide active surveillance and will continue to conduct targeted CWD surveillance statewide. Statewide active surveillance was last conducted in fall 2002, when approximately 1,100 deer were tested. This fall, approximately 800-1,000 deer will be tested statewide, including deer from every county in the Commonwealth. The four-county surveillance area named above will be discontinued. Instead, the Department will focus sampling effort in western Frederick County adjacent to Hampshire County, WV.



Virginia Female Deer Kill 1947-Present

The Department would like to advise all hunters and the general public to continue to help in the identification and testing of target animals. CWD target, or suspect animals, are defined as deer or elk 18 months of age or older that are emaciated and/or show some combination of signs, including abnormal behavior, increased salivation, tremors, stumbling, un-coordination, difficulty swallowing, excessive thirst, and excessive urination. A simple definition is an adult deer or elk that looks like it is starving and appears to have neurological disorders.

What should you do if you see a CWD target deer? First, do not attempt to contact, disturb, kill, or remove the animal. You should accurately document the location of the animal and immediately contact the Department at 1-804-367-1000, or the field office that is nearest to you. Arrangements will be made to investigate the report.

Persons wanting more information on CWD should visit the Department website at <http://www.dgif.virginia.gov/hunting/cwd.asp> or the Chronic Wasting Disease Alliance at www.cwd-info.org.

Hemorrhagic Disease (HD)

Fall 2006, as expected, was a quiet HD year. Data collected by DMAP cooperators, in Virginia, over the past decade, suggests that big HD years occur on a 3-year cycle. This is similar to what was found in the piedmont of Georgia years ago. This pattern has held in Virginia the past several years. Virginia experienced big HD years in 1999, 2002, and 2005. If this pattern holds, 2007 should be quiet, and we can expect our next big HD year in fall 2008. However, as this article is being written (August 2007), the Department is receiving an unusual number of calls about suspected HD deer

and in unusual locations (e.g., west of the Blue Ridge).

For those not familiar with HD, it is the most important infectious disease of whitetailed deer in the Southeast, and outbreaks occur almost every year across the region. HD is endemic in eastern Virginia and rare west of the Blue Ridge. In eastern Virginia, the area alongside and east of I-95, Southside, and the central Piedmont area seem to have the most HD activity on a regular basis and the largest reported die-offs. Persons wanting more information on HD may visit the Department website at www.dgif.virginia.gov/hunting/va_game_wildlife/hd.html.

Virginia Deer Management Plan Has Been Revised

The Virginia Deer Management Plan, first completed in 1999, has been revised for 2006-2015. This plan describes the

history of whitetailed deer management, current status (supply and demand) of the deer resource and management programs, different deer management options, and the future of the deer management program in Virginia. The plan identifies a framework of what needs to be done, how it should be done, and when it should be done. Guided by the VDGIF mission statement, the Virginia Deer Management Plan includes four goals which specify the general directions for deer populations, deer habitat, deer damage, and deer-related recreation. Specific objectives help guide the attainment of each goal. Preferred strategies then clarify how each objective should be achieved. By clarifying goals and directions of deer management, this plan will assist the VDGIF Board of Directors, VDGIF administrators and staff, and the public in addressing deer issues. The plan can be viewed at www.dgif.state.va.us/wildlife/deer/management-plan/.

Hound Hunting Issue

If you are a deer hunter in the eastern two thirds of Virginia, you have probably already heard, or surely will hear soon, that the Department is beginning a process to study the hound hunting issue in Virginia. The Department website states the following regarding this issue and process:

The Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (VDGIF) has received an increasing number of comments recently regarding the use of dogs for deer hunting in Virginia. While this is not a new issue, the degree to which this is becoming more of an issue is reaching a new level.

Factors influencing the increasing number of concerns include a growing human population in Virginia of about 7.5 million citizens, land use changes, loss of hunting lands, changing landownership patterns (i.e. smaller holdings) and disregard for the property rights of landowners.

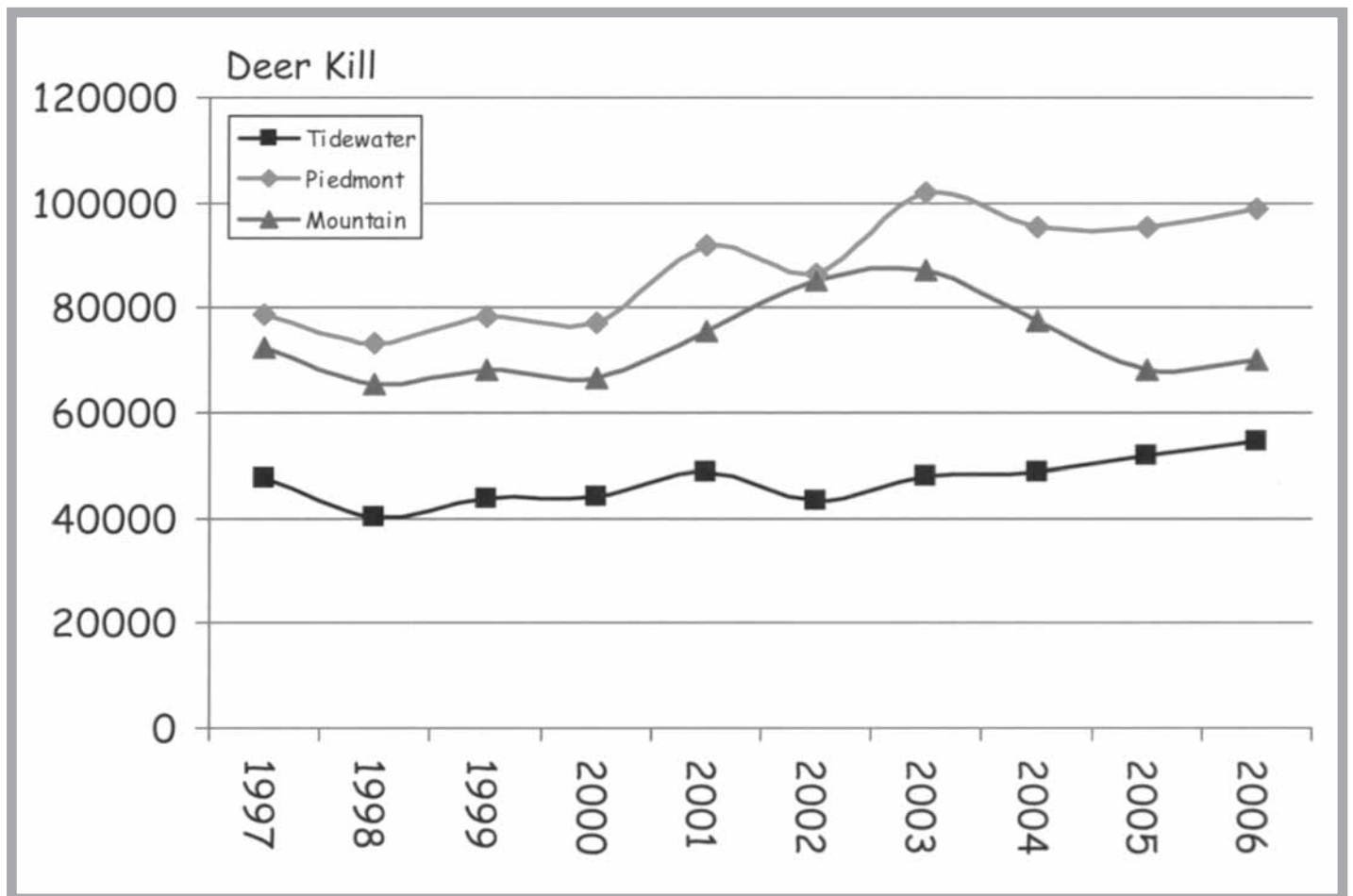
At the July 17, 2007 VDGIF Board

Meeting, the Wildlife Division staff recommended, and the Board approved, an approach to addressing this issue, which is similar to that used to develop the Virginia whitetailed deer management plan and the Virginia black bear management plan. This process will involve the use of a citizen stakeholder approach including the following:

1. Conduct focus group meetings with individual interest groups (landowner based organizations, bear houndsmen, deer houndsmen, raccoon hunters and fox hunters).

2. Create a stakeholder advisory group to consider issues identified by the focus groups. A technical committee comprised of biologists, law enforcement officers and others will support this effort. The technical committee will provide information to the stakeholder advisory group as they address the various issues and develop strategies.

The Department's goal will be, "to provide diverse opportunities for hunting with bounds in Virginia in a man-



ner that is fair, sportsmanlike and consistent with the rights of private property owners and other citizens.”

Human dimensions specialists at Virginia Tech will facilitate public involvement to accomplish this task with the resulting report and recommendations available by the fall of 2008. Persons wanting more information on this hound hunting issue and process should go to www.dgif.state.va.us/hunting/hounds/.

Tidewater Forecast

The Tidewater deer kill was 54,571 in 2006 and was up 6% from 2005. It was also up 6% the year before. On the surface, this would look bad for a region where the Department has been trying to stabilize deer herds, but the good news is that nearly all of the increase in the Tidewater deer kill over the past couple of years was due to increased doe kill levels as a result of liberalized either-sex deer hunting day regulations. Tidewater female deer kill levels have generally been the highest and most consistent in the state.

Biological data indicates that deer herd condition is fair to good. As has been the case for over a decade, deer crop damage and deer vehicle collisions remain a major deer management concern. Stable deer populations and deer kill levels are predicted for the upcoming fall. If the deer kill is up, it should be because of increased female deer kill numbers again. More likely, however, in response to high and increased female deer kill pressure, deer kill levels should decline in the future. As is usual in this region, HD may play a major role.

Northern Piedmont Forecast

The Northern Piedmont deer kill was 43,194 in 2006, down 5% from 2005. This may be good news. Female deer kill levels, which increased steadily over the past decade, may be at or approaching the point required to stop the growth of the deer herd in this region.

Increasing and record deer kills in this area were not good news the past few years. Two surveys conducted by the Department in the past have clearly indicated that the majority of citizens in the northern Virginia area would like to see

the deer population reduced.

In attempts to accomplish this deer population reduction, the Department has instituted some of the most liberal deer season regulations and bag limits in the eastern United States. For example, firearms deer hunters in Loudoun and Prince William counties can currently legally kill three antlered bucks and over 80 does annually using the Department's antlerless only bonus permit system. In several areas female deer kill levels have not been sufficient to reduce deer populations. Simply put, deer hunters killing antlered bucks do not control deer populations.

During the current ongoing regulations process, the Department has advertised for public input on an 'earn a buck' (EAB) regulation, which would require deer hunters to kill antlerless deer beginning fall

2008 in Fairfax, Fauquier, Loudoun, and Prince William counties. Under EAB, hunters would be required to shoot at least one antlerless deer (doe and/or button bucks) before they could kill a second antlered buck. Additionally, a deer hunter would be required to kill a second antlerless deer before they could kill a third antlered buck. With EAB in place, it is hoped that female deer kill levels in these counties should exceed 50% of the total deer kill on a sustained annual basis. Continued over three to five years, this should result in a deer herd reduction.

With the exception of the four counties noted above, stable deer populations and antlered buck kill levels are predicted for the upcoming fall. Hopefully, the deer kill will be down again. If the deer kill is up, it should be because of increased female deer kill numbers. Biological





condition data indicates that overall deer herd quality in the Northern Piedmont is fair to good.

Southern Piedmont Forecast

The Southern Piedmont deer kill was 55,344 in 2006, up 11% from 2005. This region has evolved into two distinct deer management areas: The South-central Piedmont and the Southwestern Piedmont.

South-central Piedmont. In 16 South-central Piedmont counties, liberal either-sex deer hunting day regulations of the late 1980's and early 1990's resulted in reduced deer herds. These reduced deer herds resulted in more conservative either-sex deer hunting regulations in the mid to late 1990's with the objective to let the deer herds recover. That recovery is now complete, and more liberal firearms season either-sex deer hunting day opportunities were adopted in this area for fall 2006 and resulted in significant increases in the

number of does killed in most of these counties. The key in this area in the future will be to find the number of either-sex days in the firearms season that will stabilize deer herds. Deer kill numbers in this area should be stable, but an increase or decrease would not be unexpected. Like Tidewater, HD may play a major role in this area.

Southwestern Piedmont. Like the Northern Piedmont, the deer management situation in the Southwestern Piedmont has needed work, for liberal regulations over the past decade have failed to control deer herds. In fact, over the past decade or so, significant deer population increases have been seen in numerous counties. The good news here is that the EAB regulation described previously (see Northern Piedmont narrative above) will also include Bedford, Franklin, Patrick, and Roanoke counties if adopted. With EAB in place, it is hoped that female deer kill levels in these coun-

ties will exceed 50% of the total deer kill on a sustained annual basis. Continued over three to five years, this should result in a deer herd reduction.

With the help of hunters, deer populations will be reduced, and kill levels in the southwestern Piedmont will be down in the near future. Herd condition indicates that the deer herd quality is good.

West of the Blue Ridge (WBR)

West of the Blue Ridge (WBR) the deer kill was 70,099 in 2006, up 3% from 2005. This 3% increase follows two consecutive 12% declines in 2004 and 2005. This stable number around 70,000 in 2006 and the previous two year decline was expected and welcomed. The mountain deer kill had increased significantly from a fairly stable level of approximately 70,000 deer annually about 10 years ago to between 85-87,000 in 2002 and 2003. The Department addressed this increase by liberalizing either-sex deer hunting day regulations in nearly every county west of the Blue Ridge. Many of these changes have more than doubled the number of doe days. These changes have worked. Mountain deer kill levels will hopefully stay in the 70,000 range or lower in the coming years.

The public land deer kill and public land deer management situation WBR deserve special comment. It will not surprise many western public land deer hunters that 2004, 2005, and 2006 were some of the worst deer kill seasons on public lands WBR in over a decade. What is going on with these western public land deer herds? It is complex, and there are probably several factors at work, including habitat quality, decreased hunting pressure, predators, and, most importantly, liberalized private land regulations. Local hunters will tell you that coyotes are having a negative effect on public land deer herds. At this time the Department has no data to prove or disprove this assertion.

Northern Mountain Region

The Northern Mountain deer kill was 33,160, mathematically stable from 2005. It was actually down 160 deer. Liberal regulations over most of this area appear

to be successful, not only in controlling herd growth, but reducing deer herds over most areas. With the exception of the counties of Alleghany, Bath, and Highland where the deer kill should be stable to increasing, deer kill levels in the rest of the northern mountain area should be stable to declining.

Southern Mountain Region

The Southern Mountain deer kill was 36,939 up 6% from 2005. The Southern Mountain region had evolved into three different deer management situations.

First, conservative deer seasons and regulations have been successful in significantly increasing deer herds over the past decade in the three coal field counties of Buchanan, Dickenson, and Wise. It should be noted that these are the only three counties in the state where the Department has been trying to increase deer herds. Deer kill levels and deer populations are predicted to increase in the future in the coal field counties.

Second, deer seasons and regulations continue to be fairly conservative in a handful of counties in far southwestern Virginia (e.g., Lee, Smyth, Russell, Tazewell, and Washington counties). This conservative approach is based on the fact that deer have literally just returned in significant numbers to these counties in the past 10 to 20 years. Because of the conservative regulations in place, deer kill numbers and populations in these counties can be expected to be stable to increasing in the future.

Lastly, liberal deer regulations have been in place, or put in place, in the Blue Ridge counties of Carroll, Floyd, and Grayson and in the Ridge and Valley counties of Bland, Craig, Giles, Montgomery, Pulaski, Roanoke, Scott, and Wythe. Deer kill levels in these counties will likely be stable to down in the future.

Summary

The 2006 deer kill total of 223,000 was unexpected. After three consecutive years of record female deer kill levels, last year's deer season forecast article had predicted that total deer kill levels would decline.



Overall, it was up ever so slightly, ~4%. The good news is that female deer kill levels were at record levels for the fourth consecutive year. Hopefully, this high and sustained female deer kill will lead to a decrease in the statewide deer herd and a decline in total deer kill numbers in the near future. Deer kill totals below the past decade's average of 208,000 are hoped for soon.

Over the vast majority of the Commonwealth of Virginia, deer population management objectives called for the deer herd(s) to be stabilized or reduced. The reason for this is that deer management over most of Virginia is based on the cultural carrying capacity (CCC). Simply put, CCC can be defined as the number of deer that can coexist compatibly with humans. CCC is a function of the tolerance of humans to deer and the effects of deer. Over much of Virginia, it would be safe to say that the CCC has been reached, and in some cases, exceeded.

Deer hunters who would like to know the exact deer kill data for their specific

county or region can find the data from 1947 to 2006 on the Department's website at http://www.dgif.state.va.us/hunting/va_game_wildlife/deer_harvest.asp.

The 2007-08 deer season should be another good deer season over most of Virginia. After four consecutive years of record female deer kill levels, statewide deer kill levels should be stable or declining. Over the majority of Virginia, we are at the point that, if a deer management mistake is to be made, it will be to overkill, not underkill, the deer herd.

Thank you for doing your part in deer management. Please support the Virginia Hunters For the Hungry program. Most importantly, be safe.

Editor's note: Matt Knox is the deer project supervisor for the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries. Knox, who is a regular contributor to our Game Management Column, continues to bring the latest biological facts to our publication and welcomes correspondence from our readers. Readers can contact the author via e-mail at matt.knox@dgif.virginia.gov. 🦌